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The Job I Forgot

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Favorite Book This Year

Moonwalking with Einstein by Joshua Foer

If you've ever been unemployed, you know that it can be a fragmented time. After 13 years working for a variety of non-profit organizations, I found myself unemployed in early 2007. I was casting around for a new job, a new career, and a new direction. My goal: get a good job that included health insurance for my family. I was filling out job applications daily, and when I saw that there was a job at the Multnomah County Library, I thought, "I could do library work; that would be fun." Soon after turning in that application, however, I landed a job in retail, at a soon-to-open, big blue and yellow store in Portland, known for assemble-it-yourself furniture and yummy meatballs. I promptly forgot I had ever applied at the library.

We opened the new store and all of the Northwest descended upon us. I was baptized into an intense customer service experience. It was non-stop, 8–10 hours a day, serving hundreds of people who had no idea how to shop in this brand new store. I realized that my job was actually to equip and train these scared, confused and overwhelmed customers on how to successfully navigate our store and go home with what they wanted. One bewildered-looking man actually came up to me and said, "This place is like a library, so big and confusing; I can't find what I want." His words turned out to be far more prophetic than I realized!

In the fall of 2008, about 18 months after I applied at the library, I got an email that said I could come take a test, which was the next step toward becoming a library employee. I did, and after a test and an interview, I was hired as a 20-hour-a-week library page at Midland Library in Southeast Portland. I kept my part-time retail job as well, since the generous health benefits fulfilled my number one priority for my family.

I enjoyed my job shelving books and assisting patrons. More than that, I enjoyed being a part of something powerful, something good. As I walked around the neighborhood, I realized that the library was the bright spot in that area of town. It was a place for people to connect with each other, and to the information and tools that they needed to survive and thrive. Midland Library serves an incredibly diverse neighborhood, with materials offered in five languages. I enjoyed serving Vietnamese patrons one moment and Spanish-speaking folks the next. I loved seeing surprise and smiles when I was able to introduce patrons to a new part of our collection they hadn't known about. I began to hear a quiet voice in my head. "Hey, I can do this—this library thing. I could do this ... forever."



The customer service skills and extensive training in serving a high volume of patrons transferred beautifully from my retail experience. I proceeded to apply for every library job opening that came along, and soon was training to work as a library clerk. Next came reference training, which qualified me to work as a library assistant. My part time status enabled me to pick up shifts in these other classifications, and opened up more horizons to my eager eyes.

Applying and interviewing for jobs with our county library system is truly an art, as well as a skill. I got better at this as I went along. I learned that your application should be exhaustive in its descriptiveness. "Customer service is one of my strengths" doesn't cut it. Describe in detail, and with several real life examples, *how* you deliver good customer service. Assume that those who will read your application have never met you, and need to know everything relevant about you. You have to fill in the whole picture of yourself.

This applies to the interview as well. Sure, you might be a really great person, with a firm handshake and great eye contact with your interviewers. But you need to project an image of yourself for the interviewers, so detailed in your examples that they can almost see you in action. Being able to recall examples of big or small successes in your work is crucial, so you have a mental catalogue of potential answers for each question you are asked.

I had six interviews in my first two years with the library. My sixth interview was to become a Library Supervisor. As part of my career search, I had read a book called "Do What You Are[1]," a book that applies personality type to work roles and the job search. Understanding my personality helped me to articulate in the interview that I wanted to be a leader, and specifically take an integral role in making decisions and leading teams.

Happily, I was offered the job of Library Supervisor ... *half time*. It was not yet time to quit my retail job. The balancing act continued. I plunged into the world of library supervision at Central Library in Portland and found it to be a rewarding experience from day one. I had the privilege of supervising artists, musicians, authors, avid bikers, and world travelers, all of whom love the library. Library folks rock! Literally, as evidenced by the "library night" of wonderful music that my colleagues shared at a local lounge.

Learning how to supervise was a new challenge, and the skill that helped me most was listening. I listened intently to each person I supervised, to hear his or her concerns, dreams and great ideas. My investment of time in them helped them hear what I was saying, and we moved forward together.


I also became involved with the Oregon Library Association's Support Staff Division, and helped plan the 2011 SSD conference at the Oregon Garden, and co-chaired the 2012 SSD Conference in Eugene. The 2012 conference encouraged support staff from all over the state with our theme of "Support Staff: Changing Lives Every Day." I continue to serve on the SSD board.

After about six months as a supervisor, the library decided it could use me full time. While I was glad to finally have a full-time job with the library, my library director laid out a new project for me, bigger than I had ever attempted before: reorganizing a department to improve customer service and distribute work more evenly amongst a team of 25 people. I interviewed many of the staff to learn about their work. This group of people was extremely committed to the library, had worked faithfully at their jobs for many years, and had a great deal of knowledge that they were happy to share! Several months and untold meetings later, the new structure was put in place, and staff were trained in their new responsibilities.



Informational interviewing has helped me learn more about librarianship as a career. I have interviewed directors of public and academic libraries, academic librarians at community colleges, medical librarians at hospitals, and several of the librarians at the Multnomah County Central Library. All those interviewed were happy to answer my questions about what librarians do in all these different kinds of libraries. Also, as I considered going back to school, they helped me think through what I wanted to gain from a degree in library and information studies.

The transitions have continued this year, as I was asked if I wanted to become a Library Supervisor at a branch, Gresham Library. This reduced my commute from over an hour to just a few minutes, and, having quit my retail job, I felt it was time to go further: I enrolled in a Master's program in Library and Information Studies at the University of Alabama. I now "go to Alabama" each Wednesday evening from 4 PM to 6:45 PM for class, via a synchronous online program. We all wear headsets and talk to each other. In fact, if the instructor calls on you, you better be ready to speak up! My current interest is information literacy, and becoming more skilled at equipping patrons to find, evaluate and use information and technology in their lives.

These past four years have been a whirlwind. I'm thankful for my loving and supportive wife and son, who came on this journey with me, as I worked two jobs for over three years. I've discovered my calling: helping patrons apply for jobs, find books, and connect to resources. I'm also thankful that, while I had forgotten about applying for the library, the library never forgot about me. 

References

[1] Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Barron. *Do What You Are*. 4th Edition. Little, Brown and Company, 2007.

